

IRS goes after Pastors for Peace for sending aid to Cuba

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In this file photo, former Cuban leader Fidel Castro waves a Cuban flag while the Rev. Lucius Walker, right, sings during a protest in front of the former U.S Interests Section's building in Havana, Cuba. JOSE GOITIA AP

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For years, the U.S.-based Pastors for Peace defied the embargo on Cuba with “caravans” of humanitarian aid hauled across the U.S.-Mexico border that were then shipped to the island.

In Havana, its founder, the Rev. Lucius Walker, was received like a hero.

Although the organization never applied for a license from the Office of Foreign Assets Control to bring aid to Cuba, it did not face reprisals, although U.S. authorities occasionally tried to withhold the shipments on the Mexican border.

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But Pastors for Peace now faces punishment for its charitable acts from another U.S. agency: the Internal Revenue Service. The organization was recently informed that it will lose its tax-exempt status for failing to declare the shipments to Cuba.

The Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization Pastors for Peace (IFCO), which has been audited by the IRS for the last seven years, said in a statement that the action is politically motivated.

“The IRS claimed that our work to bring humanitarian aid and build friendship with the Cuban people was done in violation of the Treasury Department’s ‘Trading with the Enemy Act’,” the organization said.

“We challenge the ability of the IRS to make this claim...OFAC, fully aware of our annual caravans not accepting government licenses, has never prosecuted us. How is it that IRS now has the right to strip us of our tax-exempt status?”

Asked about the IRS audit, the organization acknowledged that they “never declared [the aid to the IRS] because we had not requested a license,” said Manolo Enrique de los Santos, IFCO’s Cuba aid program coordinator.

An IRS spokeswoman declined to comment on the case citing federal privacy and confidentiality laws.

Since 1992, the caravans have carried more than 4,000 tons of humanitarian aid to Cuba in the form of school supplies, medicines and 300 buses. In 2009, when the audit began, the organization had donated eight school buses and two trucks to “churches, schools, hospitals and NGOs, as well as more than 100

tons of medical supplies to centers around the country,” the organization stated.

De los Santos said IFCO would likely have received the special licenses required by the U.S. Department of the Treasury if they had applied for them, but that “probably may have limited what we could take and who I could deliver to, and we would have not allowed the U.S. government to limit our Christian mission to help the people of Cuba ... OFAC has consistently limited how to deliver aid and to whom.”

For example, he said that “it is easier to deliver aid to a private cooperative than to a school.”

The organization also raised questions about the IRS action at a time of change in U.S. policy toward the island.

Over the past year, OFAC has expanded the list of humanitarian activities that can be performed with a general license (without requesting special authorization), including medical donations and those intended to cover “basic human needs.”

During a press conference in Havana, Gail Walker, the daughter of Rev. Walker and current executive director of the organization, stressed her father’s respect for Fidel Castro, “with whom he had a friendship that lasted forever.”

In an interview with EFE, the activist referred to the embargo as a “blockade” and also as an “anti-Christian and antihumanitarian policy.”

De los Santos said that the organization will launch a legal battle against the IRS and will continue sending aid to Cuba “without asking for permission” from the U.S. government.

“The intention of this measure is to paralyze us,” he said. “We will continue the work in other ways.”

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